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ABSTRACT

At Central Park East (CPE) schools in East Harlem, New York City, 90 percent of students graduate from high school and 90 percent of those go on to college. Starting with the CPE success story, this book shows why good education is possible for all children, and why public education is vital to the future of our democracy. Begun in the mid-1970s, CPE is now four public schools serving primarily Latino and African American students, most from low-income families. Rooted in the traditions of progressive education, CPE has focused on: (1) building democratic community, both giving decision-making power to school staff and preparing students for full citizenship; (2) promoting strong respectful relationships with families and the local community; (3) fostering "habits of the mind," rigorous critical inquiry that challenges students' curiosity and builds on their natural drive toward competence; (4) integrating the curriculum and teaching fewer subjects in depth rather than more subjects superficially; and (5) connecting learning to the real world. The innovations undertaken at CPE were made possible by school choice mechanisms (parents chose to send their children to CPE) and by the schools' small size. Small size (defined as a maximum of 20 teachers, with a maximum class size of 20) allows staff to be personally involved in all school decisions, to know about each other's work, and to know their students' work and ways of thinking; fosters physical safety and accountability; and immerses students in a school culture shaped by adults. By engaging teachers, small schools stand a chance of engaging students, too, and helping them become lifelong learners and actively participating citizens of a free society. Contains lists of suggested readings. (SV)